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The Failure of Play

Miguel Sicart[1]

Abstract

In this essay, I argue that the ludification of culture should be considered as an overall failure. The effects of (digital) play in culture and society have been largely negative, a fact that game studies and media studies have only partially assumed. While there are many positive aspects to play and games in society, it may be time to rethink the importance we give to the ludic in information societies.

Keywords

play studies, game studies, digital media, gamification

If we look at culture, technology, and society in 2025, we will see that play is at the heart of how we use technology, create culture, and communicate with others. Our media landscape is full of video games, movies based on video games, sports (often simulated in video games), and consumer experiences that have learned to attract users by mimicking video games. While not everything is a game, there's a case to be made that, in our digital societies, play is one of the main ways we connect with the world and engage with others.

This ludification of culture (Dippel & Fizek, 2017) has been praised as mostly positive. Games, the primary technologies for play, are seen as capable of addressing serious global issues, helping to cure diseases, and transforming habits. The romantic idea of play as the purest form of human expression, serving as a tool for creating culture and wielding the same powers that children have to learn and shape the world according to their will. Play is believed to be a force for good, a way of engaging with the world that leads to fulfilling lives and various forms of pleasure and enjoyment. Play is beneficial, and a playful society is valuable.

But is it?

If play shapes culture and its technologies and practices are dominant in our era, it might also be that the effort to praise play has failed, and perhaps play itself, as we've developed and promoted it, is also a failure. A quick look at the world in 2025 shows that play is everywhere, in the form of gamified recommendation systems, gamblified services, and ludic financial products. Play has become central in culture, but which play, and at what cost?

To answer these questions, I will analyze how culture shapes play. I will not propose a rhetoric of play as Sutton-Smith advocates (Sutton-Smith, 1997), but instead offer observations on contemporary phenomena and their connection to 20th-century conceptions of the ludic. My main argument is simple: the ways we have conceptualized the ludic in our culture lead to several unwelcome effects of play. The prominence of these effects in the early 21st century might explain why some argue that the idea of play as always a force for good has failed. However, since hope is not entirely lost, I will end by highlighting the successes of play and lessons we can learn from them.

This essay should be viewed as a challenge. While I will present arguments to support this stance, it is also intended to shake things up, to make us, as play and media scholars, less comfortable with our assumptions and more dedicated to the idea that play can be a positive force.

A Common Understanding of Play

Duolingo, the language-learning platform, is one of the most popular mobile apps ever released. Millions worldwide use this service to learn, refresh, or practice a language. *Duolingo* is also a success story for gamification, the field of human-computer interaction that studies applying game design principles to services and activities outside of games (Deterding et al., 2011, 2013). In *Duolingo*, users earn currency by completing tasks. This currency can be

[1]IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Corresponding Author:
Miguel Sicart, Center for Digital Play, IT University of Copenhagen, Rued Langgaards Vej 7, 2300, Copenhagen S, Denmark.
Email: miguel@itu.dk

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used to buy various perks within the app, including the ability to maintain a "streak," a series of consecutive learning units over time. In addition, users are rewarded with badges for completing activities and points that create leaderboards. *Duolingo* tracks user activity and converts that data into game-inspired tokens used within an internal economy and for competition.

This type of gamification is the most common way these design ideas are implemented. Apps like *Khan Academy* mimic this method for learning. Other platforms also use the concept of tracking user actions and displaying them through competitive gameplay (de Sousa Borges et al., 2014; Hamari, 2017). *Todoist* makes task completion a contest with points, while *Forest* promotes focus by turning continuous engagement into a growing virtual tree. Interestingly, financial services are also adopting these strategies (Ferrari Braun & Gekker, 2022). Apps like *Mint, Monefy*, and the investment platform *Robinhood* include elements of game-like design, from points and scores to user interface features. Although none of these are actual games, they all aim to feel like games and to enjoy the benefits of play.

Gamification reflects how we understand the ludic aspect in our digital culture. Other digital phenomena, such as AI chatbots or online playful environments, are part of this shift toward the ludic in digital culture (Frissen et al., 2015; Sicart, 2021b). My goal here is not to debate whether gamification succeeds or fails (Bogost, 2015; Lieberoth, 2015; Mekler et al., 2013), but to analyze what the dominant concept of play in society is, what issues it may create, and how these problems manifest in specific uses of play within society.

The premise behind society's ludification is that play is a positive force because it is an activity we freely engage in to enjoy and have fun. Drawing from a romantic understanding of play (Laxton, 2011), play is seen as a reflection of creativity and freedom. Play is understood as a voluntary movement within a rigid structure (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). The activity of play is facilitated mainly through games, which are designed artifacts that use rules and mechanics to create spaces of possibility for players to express themselves (Zubek, 2020). The ludification of society involves extending the way rules and actions are presented in games to other contexts, situations, and technologies that are not games.

The dominant form of games in a gamified society is competitive play. The quantification of activity seen through games reduces human actions to competitions for more points and icons that show skill development. Learning a language, completing a task, or managing finances becomes a contest to earn tokens that only have value within the game's logic. Still, they also reflect the quantized nature of all actions. In other words, everything turns into competition in a gamified society.

This idea of using playful interactions to learn and manage habits has been co-opted by capitalist companies to monitor individuals and exploit labor, under the notion that if workers treat their tasks like a game, they will be motivated to work even in terrible conditions. In previous work, I have called this playful capitalism (Sicart, 2021a), the use of play rhetoric to promote the economics of exploitation and privacy erosion that characterize platform capitalism. This shift of gamification from an empowering design method to an exploitation mechanism should not surprise us. After all, if the idea is that play makes less appealing or interesting activities more attractive, that applies to working conditions in warehouses as much as it does to learning languages by following a cute little simulated bird. A failure of play has been to pretend that ludic interactions can only be used for "good" purposes, ignoring the historic use of the ludic as an instrument for controlling action, from the Roman games of the Coloseum to the use of sports as propaganda for states that disregard human rights (Mirkovic et al., 2025).

Gamification shows how play logic is used outside traditional games. But, play in digital culture also appears in how interactive digital games influence other media and social phenomena. For example, serialized TV has been shaped by how computer games promote engagement through puzzles and world-building. The TV show *Lost* marked the beginning of an era of prestige TV, where the story didn't end with each episode but kept viewers engaged with puzzles within episodes that spread across different media, from the web to print. This transmedia approach, based on game design ideas, made viewers active participants—players rebuilding the fictional universe while waiting for new episodes.

This playful logic, which turns serialized television into long-lasting puzzle games, can be seen as a major cultural effect of the ludic. However, the enduring influence of this game logic has shifted from serialized TV to the world of conspiracy theories. Phenomena like QAnon demonstrate how this logic is used, where active puzzle solving is applied to content spread across different media. In digital society, conspiracies are essentially puzzles assembled by online sleuths skilled in media literacy, reconstructing fictional worlds through close (mis)readings of online sources (Hon, 2022; Zeeuw & Gekker, 2023).

Video games have also had a significant impact on contemporary society. Beyond their economic influence and their role in entertainment for various groups, the most important cultural impact of video games has been their role in fostering radical communities that have empowered the far right worldwide with both strength in numbers and an aesthetic. From Gamergate to the use of video game imagery by the Department of Homeland Security to promote mass deportations carried out by a secret police, video games have helped shape the imagery of online radicalized youth—a group that also knows how to "game" systems and often sees the world in simple rules that frame conflict (Evans, 2019; Francis, 2025).

From the gamification of labor exploitation to ludic conspiracy theories and the visual imagery of the far right, games and play—particularly digital games—have had a significant impact on culture and society. By paying attention to these

examples, we can say that this is a ludic century, as the influence of play in shaping culture is broad and impossible to ignore. At the same time, this might not be the ludic century we expected.

This is the premise of the argument for the failure of play: the ludic is everywhere, but it has not created a world that is more free, more creative, more leisurely, or more fun. If anything, it has sped up the use of tools of control by capital, the rhetoric of the far right, and the monetized mass delusions of conspiracy theory grifters. This raises the question, why did play fail?

Playing in the Name

I reached this point in my writing and was prepared to analyze how we have become a culture that worships rules and competition as forms of play. I was ready to deliver a nuanced critique of agonism from the perspective of Maria Lugones' philosophy, as well as from David Graeber's analysis of the links between rules, bureaucracy, and power. Donna Haraway's cyborgs would provide a way for me to explain how to move away from these playful traps (Graeber, 2016; Haraway, 2016; Lugones, 1987).

But I'll save those readings for another day. I don't want to finish this piece by framing play as a failed concept academically. Instead, I want you to be angry.

Angry that play is being stolen from us, turned into a commodity and used as another way to consume and be consumed. Despite all the writings about the potential of play, about the value of pleasure and fun and the ludic, the games and playable media we encounter in our everyday lives are grotesque efforts to monetize our freedom to choose what we want to do when we want to.

Playing represents ultimate freedom: doing something because we want to and because we can, not because we must. Play is a voluntary choice. Of course, it sometimes requires rules, and often needs props to work well. But those rules or props should not interfere with our fundamental, very human decision to simply do what we want, because we want to do it. And yes, sometimes we will play to hurt—nobody claims that play is always innocent and positive. True play involves the possibility of chaos, harm, and hurt. Play must exist, but since it is voluntary, we have to learn to stop, nullify, or ignore it when necessary. I am very aware of the problems that arise when everything is "just a game" or used as an excuse for harm. We need to collectively learn to stop these harmful forms of play. But that's not the kind of play that scares me or has failed.

The failure of play occurs when the world around us convinces us that gamification, certain video games, or sportswashing-driven sports competitions are "the right way" to play. I don't want more playful interfaces to hide the theft of choice. I don't want more gamified activities that make participating in the financialization of reality feel like a game. I don't want video games sponsored by imperialist armies or used as platforms for fascist radicalization of youth or as training grounds for troll armies.

Outside the comfortable bubble of research projects that exist in labs, whether public or private, the influence of play on culture has spread the idea that being bound by rules, which promote competition and consumption, is the only proper way to play. Playing has become a commodified activity that fills both work and leisure time, and it also serves as a tool for hate groups to rally and make hateful discourses more acceptable and understandable to increasingly younger audiences.

The failure of play is the success of Amazon's gamification, GamerGate, the violent libertarian survivalism of high-budget video games, the use of digital game imagery by governments to promote fascist policies, and the cozying up of sports and authoritarian figures. The failure of play is masking rules of obedience and domination behind the guise of pleasure, which is freely accepted. The failure of play marks the ludic century.

Fear of a Playful Planet

The ludic century failed because play is risky. The ability to freely choose how and why to have fun, with whom, for how long, without any other goals or results than exploring what pleasure can be, alone or together, is opposed to the current tendency toward authority and order.

So is there hope?

I believe there is. We need to keep playing, knowing what we are playing.

We need to play against the rules that want us to be more productive, more streamlined, better instruments of consumption and commodification. We should break the streaks and ignore the leaderboards. We should not take videogames seriously, so they can have a serious place in our world against the dominant discourses of what art, expression, or culture must be. We should enjoy the togetherness of sports without participating in the abuses of power that instrumentalize the joy of physical action.

We should play *against* these failures of play.

And at the same time, we should propose other forms of play that make us happy and fulfilled. Play is one of the things that best connect us to other people. Playing means choosing to be with others, choosing to have fun together, with others and for others. Playing also connects us to this planet, because all animals play. Playing can reconnect us to other species and the world we live in. Playing can mock and undermine the power that seeks to control us. Playing can let us create temporary, fleeting worlds where we are free to choose and act within the created, shared rules of pleasure.

Play will not change this world. Play will not improve the products and services that exploit us and the planet. But playing, actively choosing to have fun just because—this can be transformative. So let play fail, and seek out and create spaces where playing is possible.

ORCID iD

Miguel Sicart https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8356-5394

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Author biography

Miguel Sicart is a Professor of Digital Play at the Center for Digital Play, IT University of Copenhagen. Dr Sicart is the author of four monographs on game studies: *The Ethics of Computer Games*, *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*, *Play Matters*, and *Playing Software: Homo Ludens in Computational Culture* (The MIT Press, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2024). He is currently researching the role of play during and after the climate and energy catastrophes. His research can be found at https://miguelsicart.net, https://ridiculous.software, and https://aisplaining.us.